



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Take Us to Our Leader

January 22, 2017 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

I Chronicles 11.15-19, Matthew 12.9-23

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Our nation has inaugurated a new president. The peaceful transfer of power - no small matter in this widely unsettled world – has been achieved yet again, keeping our 241 year run intact. And for this, we should all be deeply thankful. And yet, significant divisions remain among the citizenry. Some citizens are elated; others anxious. Some dismiss ongoing chaotic rhetoric as just words; others are fearful those words may become policy. Some think governance by tweet is the new normal for our social media drenched era; others worry it betokens a lack of serious reflection. Some believe having inexperienced high level officials leading the nation is a much needed breath of fresh air; others worry the potential of such people to make disastrous errors is worrisome in the extreme. Some are confident that breaking with long established patterns of governance is just what is needed; others are troubled when experienced voices are dismissed as less than helpful baggage from the past. The divisions among us remain.

Perhaps you have read Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* once upon a time, his remarkable story set during the tumultuous French Revolution, although written seventy years later. The book's opening words remain relevant:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,

it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Dickens' point bears remembering, that how we assess our situation depends a great deal on where we sit and that we are all prone to think our own era the most fantastic and alarming of any to date. As always, the future remains uncertain, trend is not destiny, and the unexpected will occur. To everything, there is a season, said a very wise preacher a very long time ago.

My wife and I have been reading unfamiliar parts of the Bible of late. In recent months, we made our way through the books of First and Second Chronicles. Many of us are not familiar with these books, in part because only one passage from their 65 chapters ever appears in the lectionary. And much in the books is repetitive of other parts of the Old Testament albeit the stories are told from a different perspective and for a different purpose. Among the many genealogical and organizational lists in Chronicles are some wonderful stories that we do well not to overlook, especially stories of Israel's first and greatest king, David.

Now I'd like to give us a one question history quiz, the sort we all dreaded in school. What person of ongoing historical importance lived just about 1000 years ago? Think back, back, back, to about the year 1017. Who do we remember from that time who still shapes our life and thought today?

Well, I couldn't think of anyone either. I knew Charlamagne was long gone and that Genghis Khan wasn't even a glimmer in his parents' eyes yet. I went online, of course, and poked around a bit and learned that Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi, the father of modern surgery, died in Spain in the year 1013, that the Sunni-Shia split in Islam was deepening, and that China was the rising world economic power. What goes around comes around. But no single, well-known name appeared. William the Conqueror would show up in 1066, but that's as close as I could come.

But if we had asked Jews at the time of Jesus that same question, who from 1000 years ago still shapes your life and thought, who still stirs your heart and fires your imagination, many might have answered immediately, "David." I find that remarkable, that an historic figure should linger in the minds and hearts of a people for a thousand years. In fact, when folks were trying to figure out just who this Jesus fellow was, the title they came up with was 'Son of David.' Amazing, isn't it?

And the book of First Chronicles is mostly about David. You may recall he was many things – a warrior, a musician, a poet, a lover of God, an able king who united a group of mutually distrustful tribes into a nation. But in spite of the fact that he is the only man in the Bible of whom it is said that he was "a man after God's own heart," he was far from perfect. I think I could make a strong argument there are several women in the

Bible who had a heart like unto God's, not least David's great-grandmother Ruth, but David is the only man. But he was, as I said, far from perfect. He was an adulterer, a politician who could wield power in terribly self-serving ways, a pretty poor father in spite of his love for his children. And yet, and yet, there was something about him that stayed in the hearts of his people for centuries. As a leader, his like was never again seen. At his best, he was honest with himself, he listened to God, and he held himself deeply accountable for his sins, repenting long and hard and changing his behavior. Part of the greatness of the Bible's stories about David is that his flaws are neither hidden nor rationalized away. No propaganda here, no rewriting of history, no fake news. We get the whole picture of David, the good, the bad and the ugly.

The story about David we have before us this day is one of my favorites. It comes from the time before he is king. He is at war with the Philistines who are in possession of his home town, a little place you might have heard of called Bethlehem. David is sitting by the campfire with his inner circle of three warriors, and as the fire dies, he says with longing in his voice, "do y'all remember how good that water from the well by the city gate in Bethlehem tastes? Man, what I wouldn't give for a sip of that?" Off David goes to sleep. The three warriors look at each other, and without a word, take off for Bethlehem. The three of them fight their way through the Philistine lines, get some of that fine well water, and bring it back to give it to David. Does he drink the water? No. No, he pours it out as an offering to God saying, "Far be it from me, before my God, that I should do this. Shall I drink the lifeblood of these men? For at the risk of their lives they brought it."

Lesser men might have tossed that water back, and said, “Gee, thanks, boys. As good as I remember it. Hope it wasn’t too much trouble to get it.” Others might have said, “Ah, you shouldn’t have. Now, what’s for breakfast?” Still others might have said, “You know what, I’m going to tuck this away with all the other nice gifts people have given me, because I’m so, well, you know.” Not David. David, moved by their incredible devotion to him, says there is only one thing to do with this gift that came at such great personal risk, and that is to offer it to God. It is far too valuable and precious a gift to do anything else with it. [Pour water from wineskin into baptismal font here.] As scholar Walter Brueggemann asks, “Do you see why the people loved him.”

David saw everything he did, even and especially his gravest mistakes, even the devotion of his followers, through the lens of his love of God. And so, throughout all their history, the Jews remembered him, longed for him in their dark days, told stories about him so their children would carry his memory within them. For a thousand years. And even unto this day.

Forty generations after David, another fellow from Bethlehem, appears. He seeks not the water of Bethlehem’s well, but rather brings life giving water, that which quenches our deepest thirst, the thirst for God. Something about his manner, his fully lived life, his down to earthiness, his charisma, his compassion, his love for people, his healing words and touch, put folks in mind of his ancestor, David. And so they name him, calling out “Son of David” as an honorific when they seek his healing touch or to sing his praises as he rides a donkey into Jerusalem one day, for his inauguration.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, our text makes clear that Jesus is modest but sure of himself, centered in himself and certain of his beliefs, one who will not, “wrangle or cry aloud, nor break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.” And yet he is fearless in the pursuit of justice. We see him in our lesson at worship on the Sabbath, and a man with a crippled hand is present, an infirmity that likely limits his ability to work. Jesus is well aware of the prevailing teaching that to heal this man on the Sabbath is absolutely prohibited because that would be working, and no work is to be done on the Sabbath lest the fourth of the Ten Commandments be broken and sin committed. But Jesus does not hesitate, and he does the right and just and compassion thing. He heals this man and many others that Sabbath day, regardless of how outraged the religious authorities may be. And they are.

But the people flock to Jesus. Not just because of his ability to heal, which is prominent in today’s lesson, but because he opens for them a way, a path to God in every circumstance of life, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in security and in fear, in certitude and in confusion. He sets their hearts so aflame so that they first wonder, and then name him, “the son of David.

And yet, this Jesus is not David reappeared. He is more; much, much more. He does not seek a throne; rather he ascends a cross. He does not lead armies nor see violence as the solution to conflict; he is the prince of peace. Never does he overpower others; always he empowers. He is not self-indulgent, but rather indulges all manner of the least – women, children, the sick, the poor, foreigners, criminals. Far more than

David, Jesus embodies, incarnates the love to which we all aspire, agape, the love that seeks others' wellbeing first.

Jesus teaches, but more he lives, the life of service to something he calls the kingdom of God. He teaches that our job as God's people – as sons and daughters of David – is to serve God, to make of our lives an offering like that water David poured out so long ago, not to get God to do things for us, but because we long for God before all else, even before the goodness God pours into our lives. That's our deepest, deepest yearning – for a life that matters, that is a pleasing offering to God, that is not just good, but good for something, as Henry David Thoreau put it. And because that is the yearning Jesus satisfies, the living water that he gives, that is why he is our king, our leader.

Jesus has been building the kingdom of his God not for a thousand, but for more than two thousand, years now. It is his to build. We are but servants of that kingdom. Nonviolently, we fight through the hateful barriers of race and religion and gender and sexual orientation to create space for goodness and understanding, acceptance and diversity. Generously, we pour ourselves out, doing what we can to speak out and act against injustice, touching the lives that touch ours with as much kindness and goodness and grace and generosity as we can. Peacefully, we seek to bear witness that the way of violence is not God's way. Sustainably, we seek to live modestly, leaving little sign of our passing through this beautiful earth. And all of this we offer to Jesus as David's mighty men offered Bethlehem's sweet water to David, that Jesus might join it all to his great and sacrificial outpouring of love, the very foundation of God's kingdom.

On the day after the election, I was bagging groceries at the food pantry at Ministry with Community. As gently as I could, as I packed food, I asked our clients what they thought of the election results. Several allowed as how they likely wouldn't make much difference in their lives; day to day, their struggles would remain. But one woman whom I know to be a woman of faith said we would be foolish to place our lives in the hands of any politician, that faith is reserved for King Jesus alone, our Lord and savior. And in that moment, I knew I had heard the words we need to hear and to remember, that they will live in our hearts for a thousand years, giving life, again and again, always and everywhere.

Amen +